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ABSTRACT

In June 1993, a workforce development symposium was held at LaGuardia Community College, in New York, involving 119 business leaders and training and employment executives from the borough of Queens. The purpose of the meeting was to determine the critical training needs of the area's business community. Symposium participants were divided into five focus groups related to the following industry sectors: manufacturing, telecommunications, retail, utilities, non-profit, and government. A questionnaire developed by symposium organizers and soliciting information on current training needs was distributed to each group. Analyses of the completed questionnaires revealed the following: (1) deficiencies in basic skills among the workforce was the most frequently mentioned issue by focus groups; (2) work readiness, or general "work ethic" and sense of responsibility, was perceived as an issue for job applicants, current employees, and future candidates; (3) the need for diversity was frequently addressed by the groups, including the need for English-as-a-Second-Language training and meeting the needs of female heads of household; and (4) a fourth theme addressed by participants was the need for advanced skills, including upgrades of technical skills, customer service training, cross-training, management training, and training related to laws and regulations. Recommendations for improving workforce development, a list of participants, and the focus group questionnaire are included. (BCY)

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LaGuardia Community College/CUNY

Report on the

Queens Workforce Development Symposium

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December 1993

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Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
31-10 THOMSON AVENUE, LONG ISLAND CITY, N.Y. 11101 • Telephone (718) 482-7200

November 18, 1993

Dear Steering Committee Members:

I am pleased to forward the LaGuardia Community College/CUNY Report on the Queens Workforce Development Symposium.

As you can see, the Report is a concise presentation of the Symposium proceedings. We believe it captures the important dialogue that took place at the Symposium, and clearly presents the sentiments of the participating Queens business leaders regarding their critical workforce needs.

Several of the comments and recommendations are particularly noteworthy, given the new federal School-to-Work transition plan. The fact that so many Queens business leaders cited the need for enhanced basic skills and work readiness on the part of young people supports the federal plans to strengthen school to work programs. The need for much closer involvement of the business community with the education sector is also evident.

It is my sincere hope that the Symposium and this Report mark the beginning of an even more fruitful collaborative relationship between business, government, educators, and community groups. It is a relationship from which all partners stand to gain immeasurably.

I would like to suggest that the Steering Committee reconvene shortly to determine how best to use this Report and to advance its recommendations.

Sincerely,

Judith L. McGaughey

Judith L. McGaughey, Dean
Adult and Continuing Education

CLAIRE SHULMAN
PRESIDENT

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To the Members of the Steering Committee:

I congratulate you for the release of this report summarizing workforce hiring and training needs in Queens.

Workforce development is one of the issues we must tackle to ensure our borough's continued economic viability. This report clearly serves as a foundation upon which we can comprehensively address our workforce development needs. I gladly support the work you are doing in this regard.

Within the coming weeks, I plan to convene a meeting with top business leaders in our borough to help with your efforts. I also plan to enlist the support of Mayor-elect Giuliani and his administration as you attempt to move your plans to fruition.

Again, I thank all of the committee members and look forward to working with you as we promote our borough's economy.

Sincerely,

CLAIRE SHULMAN
President
Borough of Queens

THE CITY OF NEW YORK
DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT
220 CHURCH STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10013

JOSEPHINE NIEVES
Commissioner

November 22, 1993

Dear Steering Committee Members:

The Department of Employment is pleased to present these findings on the workforce needs and concerns of Queens employers.

The enclosed paper reports on the results of the first Queens Workforce Development Symposium, held in June 1993. These results will assist the City of New York to meet the employment needs of the borough's businesses by enabling planners to foster a better match between the skills of workers and the needs of local employers. The Department of Employment will work with other Steering Committee members to establish a structure for ongoing communication and interaction between business and education/training providers.

We hope this structure will be a building block for a New York City workforce development system that will ensure all citizens have access to effective job preparation programs and that employers, large and small, get access to the workers they need. By holding this Symposium, we have planted the seeds for preparing a more competitive workforce of the future.

We welcome your feedback and ideas for the future.

Sincerely,

Julia Erickson

Julia Erickson
Associate Commissioner
Public/Private Initiatives

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JACK W. RAINEY
Executive Director

November 12, 1993

Judith L. McGaughey, Dean
Adult and Continuing Education
Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College
31-10 Thomson Avenue
Long Island City, New York 11101

Dear Dean McGaughey:

I have received LaGuardia Community College/ CUNY's report on the Queens Workforce Symposium held on June 8, 1993. I found the report to be a cohesive and effective presentation of the Symposium's proceedings.

In summary, the report demonstrates the growing partnership among industry, government, educational, community and not-for-profit business assistance organizations that have come together to address workforce development needs in Queens. Increased productivity through a properly trained and skilled workforce is our opportunity to impact job retention and economic stability. This was consistently echoed by Symposium guests.

The report reflects the findings of the Long Island City Training Study, published in December 1992 jointly by LaGuardia Community College and the Long Island City Business Development Corporation. The Training Study was the beginning of our efforts to create a "business driven" system for matching employer needs with local personnel and service resources. It sought to identify the skill needs of local workers and available training resources from local education and training service providers. Several programming opportunities were noted, and the Queens Workforce Development Symposium brought a cross-section of the Queens business community together to help us redefine or reaffirm program and policy recommendations. Their enthusiasm to play a leadership role was clearly in evidence.

The LICBDC offers our thanks to all of the Queens Workforce Steering Committee members for their contributions. The LICBDC is committed to working with the Committee to implement our findings.

Sincerely,

Jack W. Rainey

Recycled Paper

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LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE/CUNY

REPORT ON THE

QUEENS WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYMPOSIUM

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President
LaGuardia Community College/CUNY

Judith L. McGaughey
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On June 8, 1993 a select group of 119 business leaders and training and employment executives met in the first Queens Workforce Development Symposium. The purpose of the Symposium was to hear directly from the business community about its critical training needs. Executives from 58 large and small organizations participated in focus groups designed to elicit crucial information about a broad range of sectors including manufacturing, telecommunications, retail, utility, non-profit, and government.

This report will describe how the Symposium was conducted and will present major findings. It is hoped the findings will be useful in the formation of current and future employment and training policy and programs in Queens and the metropolitan area.

In the focus groups, participants were asked a series of questions about job applicants, current employees, future trends, and program and policy recommendations. The primary issues that emerged were the lack of basic skills and work readiness, diversity, advanced skills training (the need to upgrade the abilities of employees to perform their jobs), and current resources for training.

Specific suggestions for improving workforce development were discussed, and participants made the following recommendations:

- strengthen public/private partnerships, particularly those which foster relationships between business and the schools;
- encourage the school system to deliver quality education;
- address deficiencies in the basic skills and work readiness problem particularly among young people;

- develop policies and programs to meet the needs of a diverse population (in the workplace and customer base);
- increase government support for training;
- ease and streamline local government regulations on business;
- increase the availability of information about workforce trends, policy, and programs; and
- develop targeted programs and strengthen existing efforts to prepare individuals for careers in manufacturing.

The Symposium is part of an ongoing citywide effort to match employer needs with personnel and service resources. Sponsors included Consolidated Edison, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, the Long Island City Business Development Corporation, the New York City Department of Business Services, the City's Department of Employment, and the Office of the Queens Borough President. Representatives of sponsor organizations participated in an informal steering committee that organized the Symposium.

INTRODUCTION

On June 8, 1993 a select group of 119 business leaders and training and employment executives met in the first Queens Workforce Development Symposium. The purpose of the Symposium was to hear directly from the business community of the city's second largest borough about its critical training needs. Sponsors included Consolidated Edison, LaGuardia Community College/CUNY, the Long Island City Business Development Corporation, the New York City Department of Business Services, the City's Department of Employment, and the Office of the Queens Borough President. Representatives of sponsor organizations participated in an informal steering committee that organized the Symposium.

Each stage in the development of the Symposium required extensive coordination and collaboration among the sponsor organizations. The Long Island City Business Development Corporation originally proposed the idea and hosted many of the planning meetings; the Office of the Queens Borough President assumed primary responsibility for identifying and inviting business executives from throughout the borough to participate in the event; the City's Department of Employment oversaw most of the logistical activities required to conduct the Symposium; the Department of Business Services assisted in the planning process; LaGuardia Community College designed the focus group format and prepared this report; and Consolidated Edison hosted the Symposium -- the first major event to be held at The Con Edison Learning Center in Long Island City, Queens.

This report will describe how the Symposium was conducted and will present major findings. It is hoped the findings will be useful in the formation of current and

future employment and training policy and programs in Queens and the metropolitan area.

PROFILE OF THE BOROUGH OF QUEENS

The Borough of Queens, with a total population of over 1.9 million is the second largest of the five boroughs of New York City in terms of both population and private sector jobs. Despite the challenge of the economic recession, Queens maintains over 450,000 jobs. According to the New York City Department of City Planning, Queens has the best-diversified industrial employment base of the five boroughs and 24 percent of the city's industrial sector employment. 32 percent of Queens employment is in manufacturing, 34 percent in transportation, communications and public utilities, 19 percent in construction, and 15 percent in wholesale businesses.

METHOD

Profile of Participants

Fifty-eight business leaders attended the Symposium, representing a broad range of industries and firms from throughout the borough of Queens. Sixty-one representatives of educational institutions, government agencies, local economic development corporations, and training and non-profit employment service providers also participated. A complete list of participants is included in Appendix A.

Procedure

After opening remarks by several speakers, participants were divided into five focus groups. The focus groups were organized by the following industry sectors: manufacturing, telecommunications, retail, utilities, non-profit, and government. The format was designed to allow representatives of similar industries to identify common concerns. In practice, many issues of concern were relevant to many or all industries. Representatives from institutions that offer training and employment services were asked to observe focus group sessions. Each group had a facilitator, a recorder, and at least one non-business observer. A list of focus group leaders is included in Appendix B.

Instruments

Focus group questions were developed by the informal steering committee that organized the event. An expert in research methods consulted with the committee to clarify the areas of discussion and to ensure that the questions asked would extract crucial information. In addition, the consultant provided training in group facilitation and dynamics for focus group facilitators and recorders. The focus group questionnaire appears in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

The following report summarizes the discussions of focus groups. Raw data used to compile the report include twelve and one-half hours of audio tapes, and forms completed by facilitators, recorders, and non-business observers. An independent

research company provided the data compilation. Training and employment needs that are common among Queens businesses are examined and discussed, industry trends are identified, and the recommendations of participants are presented.

RESULTS

In the focus groups, participants were asked a series of questions about job applicants, current employees, future trends, and program and policy recommendations. Five broad themes emerged: the lack of basic skills and inadequate work readiness, diversity, the need for advanced skills training, and current resources for training.

Basic Skills

The lack of basic skills among the workforce was the most frequently mentioned issue discussed in the focus groups. Employers in every industry spoke about deficiencies in reading, writing, English fluency and basic mathematics, particularly among job applicants, younger employees, and individuals for whom English is a second language. Many young professional-level workers in technical positions were also said to lack basic skills. Writing and speaking well were considered essential because, as one participant noted, "very often the first impression that someone gets of your company is a telephone call, a sales call, or a letter of introduction. An inarticulate employee reflects poorly on the company." A utility executive who stated that his organization gives eighth grade reading comprehension and math tests to all job applicants reported, "we can hardly get anyone to pass."

Language fluency was a need expressed by many executives. Although mentioned most often by manufacturers, one supermarket executive reported interviewing over 200 people for a new store "and at least half couldn't speak English at all." He points out that this problem is compounded by the fact that many applicants have only verbal skills in their native languages, and therefore cannot use written instructions that have been translated from English.

The application of basic skills in a business setting as evidenced by an ability to prepare correspondence, communicate by telephone, interact with customers, give change and read a computer printout were very highly regarded. Basic computer skills were also mentioned by participants across industries. In today's workplace it is interesting to note that many employers now add basic computer skills to the list of "basic skills" necessary for employment.

Many employers described basic skills as an essential foundation for a worker's development. As one government representative stated, "bring us some basic skills and we'll do the rest."

Work Readiness

A related issue mentioned frequently by participants was inadequate work readiness. Broadly defined this includes such attributes as a basic sense of responsibility, a "work ethic", punctuality, attendance, appropriate appearance, and an openness to learning. Problem-solving and decision-making skills were also cited. Employers perceived work readiness as an issue for job applicants, current employees,

and today's youth (who represent the workforce of the future). One employer said, "Basic responsibility is missing. Many employees don't have a work ethic. If the shift starts at 8:30, you're expected to be working at 8:30." Another participant drew a connection between the high dropout rate in New York City's public schools and a lack of motivation and self-confidence in young people.

As with basic skills, work readiness was seen as part of the foundation of a successful employee. Perhaps the airline executive who said "we feel that if a person is honest and willing to come to work we can teach them to do the job" summed up the sentiments of many participants.

Diversity

Diversity in the workforce and customer base was mentioned by many participants as an ongoing challenge, particularly in the areas of management and customer service. A culturally diverse workforce requires "ridding ourselves of stereotypes" said one participant. According to a construction executive, "we need a better understanding of the workforce that's available today. A retailer mentioned, "one of the things we have to do is teach employees how to manage anyone who is different from them." One manufacturer said his company sends its supervisors to school to learn Spanish because the majority of the company's employees speak Spanish. Employers also emphasized the need for training in English as a Second Language (ESL). One manufacturer described ESL as the building block for training. The importance of meeting the needs of female heads of households by providing flexible work schedules and child care

benefits was also discussed.

Several participants cited the need to respond to demographic shifts in the customer base. In response to a growth in the proportion of Asian customers, a utility executive reported hiring instructors to teach the basics of several Asian languages to customer service staff.

Advanced Skills

The fourth theme to emerge at the Symposium is broadly defined as advanced skills. This includes all matters related to upgrading the abilities of employees to perform their jobs.

Advanced skill needs were often related to economic trends and conditions. This is reflected in the employers' perceptions of their employees as well as in the specific areas in which businesses train and the kinds of training they seek. Unlike the issues of basic skills, work readiness, and cultural diversity, advanced skills needs are more reflective of the characteristics of specific industries.

Many participants related that the poor state of the economy in recent years has had a generally positive effect on the skill level of their workforce. One manufacturer said, "the individuals who have survived downsizing are better equipped and more adaptable." Another participant noted that the availability of many unemployed skilled workers has allowed businesses to "pick the cream of the crop".

Several employers expressed satisfaction with the skills of employees who have been with their firms a number of years (particularly in comparison to newer employees).

Said one participant, "the long time employee is probably the saving factor of the business."

Advanced skills training needs cited fall into five main areas: technical skills/skills upgrade; training related to customer service; cross-training; management training; and training that addresses changes in laws and regulations. Each of these areas is closely tied to the changing economy, driven by such factors as the need to adapt to technological changes, the growing emphasis on quality products and services, and recent legislation and government policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and new environmental regulations that affect business.

Technical Skills/Skills Upgrade

The need to upgrade employees' technical skills was mentioned often by participants in all industries. While several employers indicated that their workforce has the technical skills required to perform current jobs, all agreed the skills of employees must be upgraded to keep pace with emerging technologies. One manufacturer said his firm retrains its employees in the proper use of equipment each year. Utility executives said keeping pace with technology is the top priority in their training endeavors.

The important role of computers and the ongoing need for training in computer applications was discussed. Several participants noted that significant numbers of employees in their firms lack computer literacy. The fear among many employees of new computer technology, and in particular the difficulty in getting older employees to embrace new technology was discussed.

Participants expressed concern that many young employees (particularly graduates of vocational schools) are not trained to work on the machines their companies use. For some of the smaller manufacturing firms this often results in these young employees who are computer literate receiving expensive on-the-job training in the use of older machinery that is not computerized.

The importance of training employees at all levels in the organization to keep pace with changing technology was discussed, and a distinction was drawn between technical training required for supervisors and that offered to front-line employees.

Echoing the statements of many, one participant noted," the explosion of technology is going almost too fast for the education and training of our people."

Cross-Training

The concept of cross-training (teaching employees to perform more than one function) was cited often as a cost-effective strategy. Cross-training is employed in many industries, but was mentioned most by manufacturing executives. This too is closely tied to economic factors. One participant described how his manufacturing company cut operating costs during a period of downsizing by introducing the concept. He explained," in this economy I cannot afford to have specialists." Another participant, an automobile dealer, described the expanded role of employees who had been trained across functions in his organization. He said, "we've got receptionists who know the product, sales people who write up repair orders, and line workers who have input into the product." Another manufacturer added, "if employees are trained to operate more

than one machine, production doesn't stop when someone is absent."

Customer Service Training

Executives representing retail, telecommunications, utilities, and service concerns spoke extensively about the need for training related to customer service. In these industries, communication and sales skills, product knowledge, and merchandising were all described as priorities. Teaching employees to understand their relationship to clients or customers as directly related to the bottom line was discussed. One retailer commented, "it's not how much knowledge you have in your head, it's how well people respond to you."

Management Training

Across industries executives spoke about the need for management training, particularly in the area of supervision. Training in leadership, communication, writing, and presentation skills were also discussed. Despite the poor economy, retail firms emerged as the most involved in management training in recent years. One retail executive explained, "we're teaching people how to manage in competitive environments."

The challenge of teaching new management styles was also discussed. It was suggested that Total Quality Management (TQM), which emphasizes a cooperative management process to improve the competitiveness of firms, would become increasingly important to business in the future.

Compliance with New Laws and Regulations

Changes in laws and government policies regularly impact companies. Manufacturing and utility industries are most affected in this regard. One executive reported that training in her industry is "governed by changes in laws". Environmental, health, and safety regulations were all mentioned as having a tremendous impact on business priorities and the way companies do business. A manufacturing executive said, "sometimes we need additional personnel, more expenditures for treatment facilities, and equipment has to be purchased to comply with new regulations." A jewelry manufacturer agreed, "a large amount of time and money is invested in complying with regulations."

Current Resources for Training

Although participants mentioned a variety of training resources, those frequently used include consultants for management and customer service training, and educational institutions and non-profit organizations for basic skills training. Training programs custom-designed for a given company were most desirable. Some of the larger organizations were said to have substantial in-house training capabilities.

Training approaches vary by industry. Manufacturing concerns often rely solely on on-the-job training, while retailers frequently use multiple training methods. One retail executive explained, "Training is ground zero . . . It's technical. It's theoretical. It's practical. It's in a classroom setting. It's in a work setting. There's supporting manuals. There's video tapes . . . We cannot afford not to try everything."

Overall, training was viewed as an important strategy to staying competitive in

today's changing economy. Yet many firms, largely due to financial constraints, have had to limit training in recent years. One participant reported, "at the industry shows I take booklets from the consultants, I look at the fees, and I just can't write that type of check."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific suggestions for improving workforce development were discussed, including policy recommendations and actions to be taken by training and employment service providers, employers and employees.

- Develop Public/Private Partnerships

The strategy of developing partnerships between government, educators, employers, and employees was recommended. Several participants cited the Symposium as encouraging the kind of dialogue that must take place. One manufacturer stated "we need improved interaction between sectors so the right hand knows what the left hand is doing." Many participants expressed a sense of alienation from policy-makers.

Partnerships that create more opportunities for the business community to have ongoing involvement in the education process were stressed. Said one executive," Ask for my input before you develop a program for kids that I'm eventually going to hire. Then get back to me and tell me if what I said made an impact." Support was expressed for programs that bring business people into schools, and students, teachers, and guidance counselors into business.

- Schools Must Deliver Quality Education

Quality education was described as the key to success, as one participant stated, "the lifeblood" of business. Another executive added, "if we have a good education system, an employee can go to any industry and do any kind of job."

- Address the Basic Skills and Work Readiness Problem

Although the lack of basic skills and concerns about adequate preparation for the workplace among young people were the issues most often mentioned in the focus groups, there were few concrete strategies proposed to address these problems.

Several participants suggested it is the responsibility of the school system to improve the way it trains teachers and develops curriculum to focus more on preparing students for the workforce. On executive said, "if the formal education process is geared to the marketplace, you'll answer the marketplace."

Participants also suggested the youth of the city should be encouraged by all adults to take responsibility for their careers.

- Meet the Needs of a Diverse Population

ESL training for students and employees who are predominantly non-English speakers was recommended. Training in how to manage a diverse workforce and foreign language training was recommended for supervisors.

Businesses were encouraged to provide flexible work schedules and child care benefits to meet the needs of female heads of households.

- Increase Government Support for Training

Business leaders expressed a need for government to share the cost of workforce training. One executive suggested, "some kind of financial assistance, tax abatements, or even direct payment to employees would work."

- Ease and Streamline Government Regulations on Business

Many participants, especially manufacturers and small business owners, expressed frustration with New York City government rules and regulations, and suggested that reduced bureaucracy would allow them to devote more time and resources to training the workforce.

- Provide More Information about Workforce Trends, Policy, and Programs

Many participants expressed a need for information on workforce trends, policy and programs. One executive stated, "better data on emerging industries, and required skill levels would help all of us figure out which educational programs are needed." This idea was supported by another participant who suggested business would be a willing partner in such an endeavor. A centralized database that listed qualified job seekers and program opportunities was proposed.

- Develop Training Specific to Manufacturing

The development of targeted programs to prepare individuals for careers in manufacturing was recommended. The need to better match vocational schools training

with business needs was discussed. Apprenticeship programs were mentioned by several manufacturers as a cost-effective means of preparing skilled employees.

The results of this inaugural effort to tap directly into the thoughts of Queens business leaders for their impressions of critical employment and training needs would indicate that much needs to be done but that the Symposium was an excellent first step. Many participants clearly see the need for a regular ongoing dialogue, and stand as willing partners with government, educational institutions, and community groups to forge new partnerships to lead the borough into the 21st century.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS

BUSINESS PARTICIPANTS

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Marcus & Weisen

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Western Beef

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EEO Director
Turner Construction Company

Steve Carras
Home Depot

Peter Castellano, Jr.
President
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David Chardavoyne
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Port Printed Products

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Director of Human Resources
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Toys R Us

Ira Kaplan
General Manager
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Stuart Kipilman
Director of Personnel
Jetro

Joel Leibowitz
Chief Financial Officer
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Fred Levine
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APPENDIX B

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APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

- What are the skills your company is looking for in hiring? (by job category, general skills, etc.)
- What skills are your job applicants lacking? (by job category, general skills, etc.)
- What do you think of the skill level and ability of your current employees? (by job category)
- Where is the bulk of your training money spent? (by job category and skill area)
- What type of re-training or skills upgrade training takes place in your company for current employees? (by job category and skill area)
- How are you providing that training? (in-house, private consultants, non-profit agencies, colleges, etc.)
- How could these services be improved?
- Can you talk a little about the type of changes in the workplace, including technological advances, total quality management, environmental regulations and demographic shifts, that might affect your future training and hiring needs?
- What programs or services would be valuable to meeting your company's future workforce needs?
- Open discussion.